

## **Loving People, Laboring, Learning in Confucian Psychological Assets and Job Burnout: the Mediating Role of Self-Efficacy**

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**Abstract:** The aim of the study was to obtain a deeper insight into the associations between psychological characters advocated by Chinese Confucian culture and job burnout, by testing the possible mediating role of self-efficacy. 326 grassroots cadres accomplished the Questionnaire on Loving people, Laboring, Learning in Confucian Psychological Assets, General Self-efficacy Scale and Oldenburg Burnout Inventory. The results revealed that the three Confucian psychological assets, self-efficacy, job burnout (exhaustion and disengagement) were significantly correlated with each other. Structural equation modeling indicated that laboring and learning were associated with higher self-efficacy, completely mediating the effect on exhaustion and disengagement. Self-efficacy failed to function as a mediator between loving people and job burnout and loving people directly negatively predicted exhaustion and disengagement. The findings suggest that grassroots cadres can enhance their loving people, laboring, learning in Confucian psychological assets to reduce exhaustion and disengagement they experience in work, maybe through higher self-efficacy.

**Key words:** Job burnout • Self-efficacy • Chinese Confucian culture • Mediating effect • Grassroots cadres • Occupational mental health

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### **INTRODUCTION**

The concept of burnout evolved from observations and interviews in the 1970s by Freudenberg [1] and Maslach [2]. Burnout is a term used to describe phenomena including extreme fatigue and loss of idealism and passion for one's job that is not relieved during the time normally used for recovery [3]. Burnout seems to ring true to a common experience among people, which has inspired researchers to study it and try to better understand what it is and why it happens [4]. In almost 40 years, researchers have extended the concept of job burnout, investigated the reason why burnout happens and induced cross-cultural, integrative and intervention researches on it [5-10]. On the basis of Job Demands-Resources Model (JD-R Model), job burnout includes two dimensions: exhaustion and disengagement from work, while job demand and job resource are two fundamental factors influencing burnout. Job demands are most predictive of feelings of exhaustion, whereas lacking job resources is most predictive of disengagement from work [11]. JD-R model was further extended by bringing

personal resources into the influential factors on burnout. Personal resources are aspects of the self that are generally linked to resiliency and refer to individuals' sense of their ability to control and impact upon their environment successfully [12]. Personal resources are similar with psychological resources and psychological capital at work, which include optimism, hope, self-efficacy, resilience, meaning-making, self-regulatory focus etc. [13]. Those above are all effects of psychological characters advocated by western culture on job burnout, in this study we intend to explore the effect of psychological characters advocated by Chinese Confucian culture on job burnout in modern China.

Burnout was predominantly identified within the human service, but now the burnout metaphor was extended from the intense requirements of client service to other work requiring creativity, problem solving, or mentoring [4]. Grassroots cadres are lowlier officials in state government organs in China, who work directly in serving people. The number of grassroots cadres in China is considerable. Research has shown that job burnout could remarkably predict anxiety and depression in

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administration cadres [14]. Furthermore, the party and governmental cadres' job burnout was negatively correlated with job performance [15]. There are researchers who focused on job satisfaction, stress and deviant behavior of civil servants in Malaysia [16], as well as job stress and job satisfaction of municipality personnel in Iran [17]. Few researchers have focused on what affects grassroots cadres' job burnout in China. It's interesting and worthy of investigating whether psychological characters advocated by Chinese culture influence grassroots cadres' job burnout in China.

The traditional Chinese culture encompasses diverse and sometimes competing schools of thoughts, including Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, etc. and a host of regional cultures. Nevertheless, Confucianism is undisputedly the most influential thought, which forms the foundation of the Chinese cultural tradition and still provides the basis for the norms of Chinese interpersonal behavior [18]. Since Han dynasty, Confucianism has become the legitimate ideology advocated by Chinese ancient government. Ancient Chinese people received the education of Confucian Classics then participated in Imperial Examination that selected officials through evaluating their mastery of Confucianism. If enrolled, they would become Chinese government officials who induced Confucianism in their government affairs. Officials in ancient China are Confucian officials. Even though Imperial Examination is abolished now, Confucianism has spilled over into every Chinese people, including Chinese government officials mainly composed of grassroots cadres. Thus, the current study investigated whether psychological characters advocated by Confucian culture influence job burnout.

We name the psychological characters advocated by Confucian culture as "Confucian psychological assets", on the base of that, behaviorist Watson [19] brought economics terms, assets and liabilities, into psychology. He pointed that personalities are all assets and liabilities that individuals own in reactions. Within, assets are part of the individual's equipment, which make for his adjustment and balance in his present environment and for readjustment if the environment changes. Liabilities are part of the individual's equipment, which does not work in the present environment and the potential or possible factors, which would prevent his rising to meet a changed environment. Thus, "assets" refer to positive psychological characters and "liabilities" refer to negative psychological characters. We suppose there might be a few Confucian psychological assets in Chinese culture.

The representative Classic of Confucian culture, The Analects, contains a wealth of wisdom. The previous researches on leadership wisdom mostly adopted speculative method through extracting several words and expressions in it, rather than systematic empirical method. Li *et al.* [20] used open coding method, developed coding manual and published the book, A Coding Manual for Management Competence Based on the Analects of Confucius. Zhang [21] used the coding manual as the tool, 9 middle senior managers' documentary materials of interviewing their experiencing accidents as coding materials and found 74 Confucian psychological characters which had cumulative frequency of above five times. Loving people frequency hit 46 times, laboring frequency hit 65 times, learning hit 45 times, which respectively ranked the 9th place, 4th place and 10th place. So loving people, laboring and learning are essential Confucian psychological assets. Yet, what are loving people, laboring and learning?

"Loving people" stems from Chapter 12 of The Analects [22]. Fan Chi asked about a good ruler. The Master said, "A good ruler loves the ruled." Here, Confucius explained benevolence as loving people. Actually Confucius's multiple explanations on benevolence have internal connections, benevolence is an important part of values advocated by Confucius [18]. Loving people in his sayings involves ancient humanistic spirit and the spirit, loving people, manifests on managers today. Redding [23] delved into the sociocultural values and structures, business organization and management style of overseas Chinese enterprises in Hong Kong, Singapore and Taiwan and proposed the concept, benevolent leadership. Benevolent leadership takes roots in traditions of Confucian culture and Chinese paternalism management, means that leaders show individual, comprehensive and long consideration to subordinates, which is a constructive leader behavior popular in subordinates [24]. Thus, loving people in Confucian psychological assets, as a positive psychological character advocated by Confucian culture, still has a place in modern management.

"Laboring" stems from Chapter 20 of The Analects [22]. Zi Zhang asked Confucius, "How could a man become a good ruler?" The Master said, "A man good in five aspects and free from four evils may become a good ruler." Zi Zhang asked, "May I know in which five aspects?" The Master said, "An intelligent man should do good without waste, make people work without complaint, have desire without greed, uphold justice without pride and inspire respect without awe." "Make

people work without complaint” means that the ruled do what they can, how could they complain? Laboring is working in a wider sense today. As for work attitude, Chinese culture advocates values, like professional dedication, thrift and diligence and psychological character “laboring”, manifests as diligence within [18]. Thus, Confucian psychological asset laboring, advocated by Confucian culture is a positive psychological character.

“Learning” is referred several times in The Analects, for example “Be firm in belief and fond of learning, said the Master.” in Chapter 8, “A cultured man, said the Master, if wide read in literature and restrained by the rites, would not overstep what is right.” in Chapter 6 [22]. “Learning” means learning literally, but refers to self-learning as a personal psychological character. Researchers chose 18 senior managers of family firms, conducted the Behavioral Event Interview, established the competency model of senior managers in the family firms and validated the competency assessment method. The competencies of senior managers in family firms includes self-learning [25]. Self-learning is one of competencies being different from that of generic competency model of senior managers in the overseas firms or state-owned firms in China. It is clear that individual differences carry a significant effect on individual’s behaviors [26]. One with Confucian psychological asset, learning, usually is initiative to learn and loves learning in one’s own heart. It seems that Confucian psychological asset learning, is a special psychological character in Confucian culture.

Previous studies suggest that benevolent leadership is of great value in organizations and management. Leader benevolence is positively correlated with task performance, employees’ gratitude and return and work attitude etc. [27-29] and significantly influences employees’ well-being [30]. Some researchers found that psychological capital acted as a moderator between benevolent leadership and grass-roots civil servant’s service performance [31]. Those are all effects of benevolence of leaders on employees. As we know, benevolence is loving people in Confucian psychological assets. Does the leaders’ loving people affect work attitude and mental states of those leaders themselves? Even though grassroots cadres are lowlier officials in Chinese government, they still have their own subordinates. Therefore, grassroots cadres can be regarded as leaders. Does loving people in Confucian psychological assets, affect grassroots cadres’ job burnout?

In addition, “laboring” and “learning” belong to special psychological characters in Chinese culture; there are few similar or relevant concepts in western psychology. Yet, “laboring” and “learning” both have close relations with working. Laboring is working in wider sense and learning is an important part of working. Thus, to investigate whether “loving people”, “laboring” and “learning” which are advocated by Chinese Confucian culture as personal resources, are related to job burnout in grassroots cadres, we proposed the first hypothesis: Loving people, laboring, learning in Confucian psychological assets will be negatively related to job burnout.

Self-efficacy is defined as “People’s judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances” [32]. Expectations of personal efficacy are derived from four principal sources of information: performance accomplishments, various experience, verbal persuasion and physiological states. Herein, “performance accomplishments” is especially influential, because it is based on personal mastery experience [33]. Loving people is personal experience; laboring and learning are both process of personal mastery experience. Previous researches mostly suggested performance accomplishments/mastery experience is the most important predictor variable to self-efficacy. Mastery experiences can significantly predict science self-efficacy [34] and mathematic self-efficacy, French self-efficacy [35]. In Internet use, pre-experience could predict all the factors in Internet self-efficacy survey [36]. Thus, we proposed the second hypothesis: Loving people, laboring, learning in Confucian psychological assets will be positively related to self-efficacy.

It has been widely proven that teachers’ self-efficacy can negatively predict job burnout [37-39] and emotional exhaustion [40]. There are similar results found in other occupations, for example, nurse self-efficacy is the strongest predictor of exhaustion [41]. There is evidence in meta-analysis that average effect size estimate for the association between self-efficacy and burnout is of medium size [42]. Moreover, self-efficacy partially mediated work stress to job burnout [43]. Since to date, little is known about the possible mediating roles of self-efficacy, we proposed the third hypothesis on the base of the first two: the negative effects of loving people, laboring, learning in Confucian psychological assets on job burnout are mediated by higher self-efficacy.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

**Participants and Procedure:** The study was conducted with trainees from a cadre-training institute in Beijing, China. We administered the questionnaires to 5 combined classes with 60 to 70 trainees for each on. The participants completed the corresponding survey in class, which took about half an hour. The administration of questionnaires was in paper-and-pencil. Finally, 328 trainees returned the questionnaires. Two trainees were excluded because their questionnaires answered regularly or had one or more scales unfinished. Therefore, we got a finally sample of 326 (259 male, 62 female; five with no answer), which aged between 23 and 55 (Mean age=38.28, SD=5.48). More than half of the participants identified as minorities (59.20%), with 37.42% of Han Nationality and 11 with no answer. As regards the position, 163 participants (50%) are leaders at the section level and 120 participants (36.8%) are leaders at the vice-section level, with one leaders at the department level, one leaders at the county level, six leaders at the vice-county level, 27 participants are not leaders and the left 8 participants with no answer. 284 of the sample (87.12%) were cadres and deputy cadres in CPC township committee and township-level govern organs. For this reason, they are collectively called “grassroots cadres”.

**Measures:** *Loving people, laboring, learning in Confucian psychological assets.* Questionnaire on loving people, laboring, learning in Confucian psychological assets, developed by Li *et al.* [21], was used to assess loving people, laboring and learning. The questionnaire involves three dimensions, namely, loving people, laboring and learning. And each dimension is made up of one story and five pertinent Q & A items, so there are 15 items in total. Participants endorsed each items on a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging form 1 (Extremely low) to 6 (Extremely high). In each dimension, higher score indicates greater level in that Confucian psychological asset. In this study, Cronbach’s alpha coefficients in the three dimensions (Namely, loving people, laboring and learning) were respectively 0.72, 0.73 and 0.54. Such a tool was used in previous study [20] but it is still is a new tool. For this reason, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was used in this study, modified indexes were:  $\chi^2/df=4.84$ , NFI=0.74, IFI=0.78, CFI=0.78, GFI=0.83, RMSEA=0.11. According to the modified indexes, relevant path was set

up for the errors between loving people-related item 1 and 2,3 and 5; between the laboring-related item 1 and 4, 4 and 5; between the learning-related item 1 and 2, 1 and 4, 2 and 4, so as to run again. And the outcomes were as follows:  $\chi^2/df=2.92$ , NFI=0.85, IFI=0.90, CFI=0.90, GFI=0.91 and RMSEA=0.08. The above-mentioned results showed that this questionnaire’s reliability and validity were fine.

**Job burnout.** Job burnout was measured with the Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI) [44, 45]. The OLBI measures the two dimensions of burnout: exhaustion (8 items, e.g., ‘After my work, I regularly feel worn and weary’) and disengagement (8 items, e.g., ‘I frequently talk about my work in a negative way’). Items were rated on a 6-point Likert scale, ranging from 1(Strongly disagree) to 6(Strongly agree). Higher score indicates greater level of each dimension of burnout. In this study, this scale’s Cronbach’s alpha coefficients were respectively 0.70 and 0.61 in the two dimensions.

**Self-efficacy.** Self-efficacy was measured with 10-item General Self-efficacy Scale (GSE) [46]. Items were answered on a 6-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1(Strongly disagree) to 6(Strongly agree). Higher score indicates more self-efficacy. In this study, the scale’s Cronbach’s alpha coefficient is 0.76.

## RESULTS

**Common Method Bias:** All variables were measured by self-report questionnaires with Likert-6 scoring method at once, so there might exist common method biases. Therefore, Harman’s test method was adopted to compare the single-factor model and six-factor model through confirmatory factor analysis to test whether there were common method biases. Table 1 presents the outcomes.

Six-factor model was better than single-factor model in various fitting indexes in Table 1 and  $\Delta\chi^2=1560.842$ ,  $\Delta df=15$  and  $p<0.001$ , which proved six-factor model was better than single-factor model and there was no common method biases.

**Descriptive Statistics and Correlations:** Table 2 details descriptive statistics and correlations for all measures. Loving people, laboring and learning were all significantly positively related to self-efficacy and significantly negatively related to exhaustion and disengagement. Self-efficacy was significantly negatively related to exhaustion and disengagement.

Table 1: Common method biases Test

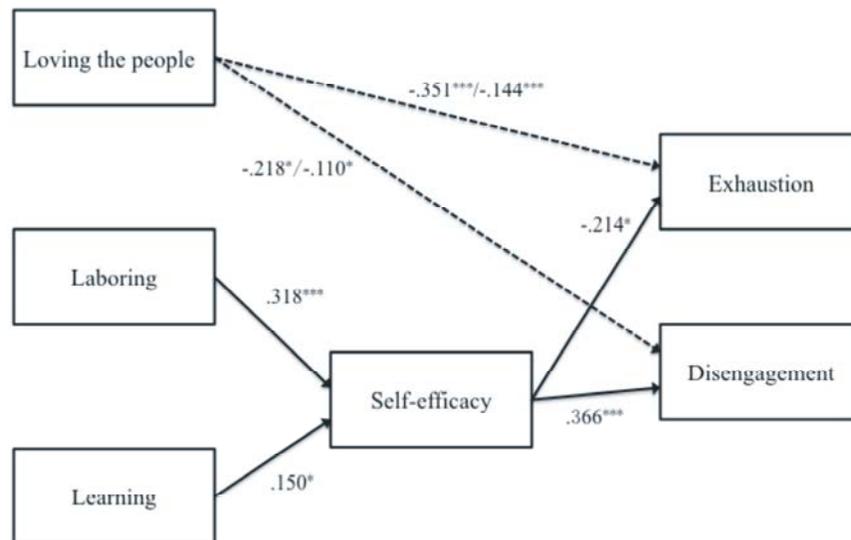
	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2/df$	NFI	IFI	CFI	GFI	RMSEA
Six-factor	1697.776	764	2.222	0.700	0.810	0.807	0.778	0.061
Single-factor	3258.618	779	4.183	0.425	0.493	0.489	0.589	0.099

df: degrees of freedom; NFI: Bentler-Bonett normal fit index; IFI: incremental fit index; CFI: comparative fit index; GFI: goodness-of-fit index; RMSEA: root mean square error of approximation.

Table 2: Means, standard deviations and correlations among measures(N=326)

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5
1.Loving people	4.460	1.024	1				
2.Laboring	4.608	1.088	0.577**	1			
3. Learning	4.163	0.865	0.360**	0.277**	1		
4.Self-efficacy	4.732	0.875	0.264**	0.360**	0.238**	1	
5.Exhaustion	2.738	0.724	-0.307**	-0.309**	-0.183**	-0.280**	1
6.Disengagement	2.729	0.645	-0.209**	-0.222**	-0.152**	-0.396**	0.249**

SD: standard deviation  
\*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001



\*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

Fig. 1: Final Model with the relationships between Confucian psychological assets, self-efficacy and job burnout.

**Mediation Analyses:** To test the possible mediating role of self-efficacy between the Confucian psychological assets and job burnout, we performed SEM on those variables in Amos 20.0 with maximum likelihood method. According to the modified indexed results, the initial model was modified step by step and the final model was established in Figure 1.

To simplify the Figure 1, the correlations between the exogenous variables were not shown. Dashed lines represented direct paths from the Confucian psychological assets to job burnout and continuous line represented self-efficacy's indirect path between the Confucian psychological assets and job burnout.

The goodness of fit indices showed, in general, a good adjustment of the model to the data [ $\chi^2=11.690(6)$ ,  $p=0.069$ ;  $\chi^2/df=1.948$ ; GFI=0.988, AGFI=0.957, RMSEA=0.054]. In Figure 1, the model demonstrated the mediating role of efficacy in the Confucian psychological assets-job burnout link (The direct influence of loving people on job burnout is the only exception). Specifically, self-efficacy captured all the effects that laboring and learning have on exhaustion and disengagement.

Bootstrapping analyses was performed using AMOS to test the significance of the mediating effect. We applied 1000 bootstrap resamples with 95% bias-correlated confidence intervals, and CIs of all four paths did not

Table 3: Bootstrapping analyses of the magnitude and statistical significance of indirect effects

Model pathways	standard estimates	SE	95% CI	
			Lower	Upper
Laboring → self-efficacy → exhaustion	-0.068**	0.023	-0.119	-0.028
Laboring → self-efficacy → disengagement	-0.117**	0.023	-0.164	-0.074
Learning → self-efficacy → exhaustion	-0.032*	0.016	-0.073	-0.008
Learning → self-efficacy → disengagement	-0.055*	0.023	-0.107	-0.016

SE: standard error; CI: confidence interval.

\* $p < 0.05$ , \*\* $p < 0.01$ , \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

contain zero. That is to say, self-efficacy was the significant mediator between laboring, learning and exhaustion, disengagement.

Analysis of the significance of indirect effects of self-efficacy revealed that higher levels of laboring predicted fewer exhaustion and disengagement in work. Significant mediation via self-efficacy was evident for exhaustion (Indirect effect:  $B = -0.068$ ,  $SE = 0.023$ , 95% BCa CI:  $-0.119, -0.028$ ) and disengagement (Indirect effect:  $B = -0.117$ ,  $SE = 0.023$ , 95% BCa CI:  $-0.164, -0.074$ ) as outcomes.

So as to learning, significant mediation via self-efficacy was evident for exhaustion (Indirect effect:  $B = -0.032$ ,  $SE = 0.016$ , 95% BCa CI:  $-0.073, -0.008$ ) and disengagement (Indirect effect:  $B = -0.055$ ,  $SE = 0.023$ , 95% BCa CI:  $-0.107, -0.016$ ) as outcomes.

In sum, in line with our hypotheses, the negative association between Confucian psychological assets and job burnout was significantly mediated by self-efficacy, except for loving people in Confucian psychological assets.

## DISCUSSION

As hypotheses, the present study affirms that loving people, laboring, learning in Confucian psychological assets, are significantly negatively related to job burnout (exhaustion and disengagement), in the grassroots cadre sample. Besides, the three Confucian psychological assets are all significantly positively related to self-efficacy. This study provides novel preliminary evidence that laboring/ learning is related to less exhaustion and disengagement in work totally through higher self-efficacy. Unexpectedly, loving people predicts less exhaustion and disengagement in work and self-efficacy fails to function as a mediator between loving people and job burnout.

Each Confucian psychological asset is connected with a pattern of self-efficacy, which can explain the link with job burnout, except for loving people. Loving people can predict less exhaustion and disengagement without

any mediating effect of self-efficacy. That is to say, one who loves others more, he/she will have less job burnout, act less disengagement behavior, feel less exhaustion in work. The reason might be that when one loves others more, he/she will not have sense of distance with others. Job burnout was conceptualized as a multi-component (emotional exhaustion, diminished personal accomplishment and depersonalization) construct [47], herein depersonalization is an attempt to put distance between oneself and service recipients [3]. The result of meta-analysis showed that emotional exhaustion was strongly related to depersonalization ( $r_c = 0.64$ ) [48] and disengagement was related to increased depersonalization ( $r = 0.307$ ) [49]. Therefore, when one with higher loving people in Confucian psychological assets, who cares about others more, his/her depersonalization will be lower. Then his/her emotional exhaustion will be less and he/she will have lower level of job burnout. Moreover, the main work of grassroots cadres is to serve the people and grassroots cadres are the bridge between government and people. Thus, a grassroots cadre who with high loving people in Confucian psychological assets might feel good in work and satisfied with work. Loving people can be regarded as a organizational citizen behavior which has been proved positively correlated with job satisfaction [50]. And job satisfaction is negatively related to emotional exhaustion and disengagement [51]. It's not difficult to explain why loving people in Confucian psychological assets negatively directly predict exhaustion and disengagement in grassroots cadres.

The negative effect of laboring and learning in Confucian psychological assets on job burnout (Exhaustion and disengagement) can be completely explained by higher self-efficacy. As anticipated, individuals high in laboring/learning in Confucian psychological assets were found to be likely to trust their own abilities more, resulting in low exhaustion and disengagement in work. One possible explanation for the negative influence of laboring or learning in Confucian psychological assets on job burnout through self-efficacy

could be that, laboring and learning both can help people to gather experiences and have performance accomplishments. Furthermore, there is solid empirical evidence supporting performance can significantly predict self-efficacy [52, 53]. By definition, “laboring/learning” means loving laboring or learning, namely individuals with laboring or learning in Confucian psychological assets, are willing to throw themselves into working or learning. This is opposite with connotation of job burnout. At the meantime, self-efficacy is negatively correlated with exhaustion and disengagement [54] and can negatively predict individual’s job burnout [39, 40]. We conclude the unique pattern that the influence of laboring and learning in Confucian psychological assets on job burnout, exhaustion and disengagement, was totally mediated by self-efficacy.

This study shows some potential limitations that we hope future researches overcome. For one thing, the cross-sectional, correlational nature of our study, with mediation analyses based on data collected concurrently, limits the capacity to identify causal pathways. Thus, although we have proposed the influences order (Confucian psychological assets – self-efficacy – job burnout), only the development of prospective and longitudinal studies will permit the establishment of valid conclusions regarding the causal relationships between the variables in question. For another, the majority of the convenience sample of trainees from a cadre-training institute were identified as minorities. It is suggested that future studies should consider the influence of nationalities.

Some practical implication could be proposed from findings in the current study. For instance, an important goal to release grassroots cadres’ exhaustion and disengagement in work could be development of educational guidelines on their loving people, laboring, learning in Confucian psychological assets. Self-efficacy is one of the valuable personal resources that can supplement the relationship between Confucian psychological assets and job burnout. Moreover, the current study raises an interesting scenario that the psychological characters advocated by Confucian culture, namely Confucian psychological assets, are helpful to reduce people’s job burnout and self-efficacy also plays an interesting mediating role in associations between some Confucian psychological assets and job burnout. This findings suggests new ways to improve people’s work states, which has important value on work states and psychological states of modern people.

Theoretically, this study can enlarge and enrich the study context of job burnout with integration of Chinese traditional Confucian culture and modern western psychology.

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